

Taking Back the Academy

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replying to [The Editors's piece](#)

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What is to be done?

Last Friday, President Trump sent out a [couple of tweets](#) saying he'd instructed the Treasury Department to review the tax-exempt status and funding of U.S. schools, colleges, and universities. Given the commitment of so many educational institutions to what Trump called "Radical Left Indoctrination," the president suggested they were entitled neither to special tax privileges nor unfettered access to the public purse.

Dismissing those tweets as mere bluster would be a mistake. The president sent out a similarly blunt threat to cut off UC Berkeley's federal funding in the wake of the riot that shut down a talk by Milo Yiannopoulos in early 2017. Two years later, the president followed up with an Executive Order on campus free speech. The president understands that brusque tweets set off debates in the short term, and policy innovations over time.

Let us take the latest tweet seriously, then, not limiting ourselves to the question of the tax-exempt status of colleges and universities, but asking *what can be done more broadly to reform higher education*.

Past the Rubicon?

Our colleges and universities seem to have crossed some invisible line beyond which lies *de facto* transformation into indoctrination camps. The illiberal impulses that have undone our universities, moreover, are now spilling into the culture at large and tearing the nation apart. After six decades of disastrous decline, culminating in today's woke revolution, is it too late now to save the academy? Or has the very scale and visibility of the calamity spawned by decades of campus multiculturalism and political correctness (now invoked with terms ranging from "intersectionality" to "cancel culture") created an opening for restoration?

The answer begins from the essential point that systematically reforming a massive, wealthy, powerful, and deeply entrenched economic and cultural sector like the academy requires an ambitious and well-thought-out strategy, whereas the academy's critics have devised nothing of the sort.

I'm not sure we even realize that a plan is both necessary and absent. For some, the seeming invulnerability of the academy to reform—insulated as it is from public pressure by tenure, massive government subsidies, and cultural heft—discourages systematic strategizing. Others write op-eds that analyze, expose, and exhort (this was me—and a great many others—until I realized that the academy's decline was only accelerating, and that op-eds alone are useless). Still others await a *deus ex machina*: higher education's economic bubble will burst (it's been decades since this hope was floated,

and it hasn't happened); alumni will withhold donations (they don't); the silent majority of classically liberal faculty will finally reassert authority (they never did, and their majority is gone now); or maybe a sympathetic American president will tweet out some solution (this will never be more than a partial success in the absence of a broader strategy). Lately, some have suggested defunding the academy, as if an army of angry conservatives could actually pull that off. That gravely underestimates the forces protecting the academy from such assaults.

While red state legislatures especially have been slowly reducing university funding under a combination of economic pressure and political hostility, proposals to reform the academy or to substantially cut funding face tremendous barriers. If a few strongly conservative legislators are gung-ho for reform, a great many more politicians of both parties are loath to set themselves against the universities. Voters count on being able to send their children to public universities at in-state rates, or to expensive private universities with government loans and grants. Even, or especially, in red states, influential alumni associations pressure legislatures to support public universities. Football programs (if not more boutique ones like squash) are sacred cows; it's tough to reform universities when the lion's share of alumni lobbying is devoted to keeping *alma mater* fat and happy. Texans might not be fans of Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, but heaven forbid the legislature should pass a bill that rankles UT Austin (although it's just about as left-leaning and hostile to conservative students as the Ivies). Even in red states, public university regents are generally "captured" by their schools, and thus unwilling and unable to take on the task of reform. At both the state and federal levels, members of the legislative committees that control education tend to be the most sympathetic in the body to universities. A Republican Education Committee chair can kill a reform bill that might otherwise garner the support of his caucus. He's probably chair in the first place because there's a major university campus—if not several—in his district.

Breaking the Monopoly

The underlying problem is that college is still the best game in town for parents hoping to set their children on a path to the comfortable middle- or upper-middle-class. In the same way that conservative parents are frequently trapped into sending their children to prestigious but left-leaning colleges, the country as a whole is trapped into supporting a sector that is simultaneously a leftist indoctrination camp and the most reliable key to upward mobility. True, the dirty little secret of American higher education is that it admits far too many students, many of whom are neither properly prepared for college nor particularly committed to it. They're going with the flow because there are few real options and heavy expectations from parents and friends. After these students drop out, indebted, discouraged, and marked as failures, they are worse off than if they had never entered college. Yet they could have flourished in the private sector. On the whole, however, college remains an unequalled path to success. Higher education enjoys a de facto monopoly over career preparation for white-collar jobs in this country. To reform the academy, that monopoly must be broken.

The way to end the higher ed monopoly is to build up an apprenticeship sector. Europe has a robust apprenticeship system, and this is one area where Americans might be able to learn something from the Continent. Apprenticeship programs could move high school graduates into white-collar jobs far more quickly than college, and without crippling debt. Right now, white-collar employers use a college's reputation and students' grades as proxies for aptitude and willingness to work. Businesses might be persuaded to turn to well-crafted apprenticeship programs instead, perhaps with a kickstart from government funding diverted from higher education.

Senator Josh Hawley had the right idea when he introduced a [bill](#) last year that would “make job-training and certification programs, like employer-based apprenticeships... eligible to receive Pell grants through an alternative accreditation process.” Hawley said he was aiming to “break up the higher education monopoly,” exactly the right goal and message. Yet Hawley’s proposal has been invisible since then. Critics of the academy don’t seem to realize that if they actually want to make a change, proposals like Hawley’s are the essential prerequisite. Legislators won’t be able to vote for substantial cuts to higher education until they have an alternative to support in its place. In the long term, a robust apprenticeship sector could lead to significant reductions in total government expenditures for higher education. In the short-term, a significant portion of federal funding diverted from higher education will have to be directed to the creation and expansion of apprenticeship-based career paths.

There is a problem of critical mass here. Only when the apprenticeship sector is sufficiently large will it become a truly viable alternative to college. Parents and students will want a proven alternative. It will take time and investment to get to that point. Think tanks will play an essential role, studying European apprenticeship systems, talking to businesses to find out what it would take to make an apprenticeship program work here, and crafting proposals that convince businesses to jump in, and government to help. Once the apprenticeship sector grows, it’s bound to spawn recreational programs that would provide an alternative to the real appeal of college—the world of parties, dorms, clubs, fraternities and sororities, and sports. Those perks are tough to compete with. Then again, avoiding decades of unnecessary debt while enjoying social life on a salary in a big city is quite a lure.

Sen. Hawley is right. Breaking up the higher education monopoly is the *sine qua non* of systematic reform. Only when the bloated higher education sector is downsized and disciplined by competition will legislators be in a position to control ever-expanding higher ed subsidies, tuition, and debt. Republicans who say “I support higher education too!” are in a race they can’t win against socialist Democrats pushing free college for all. Breaking the higher ed monopoly and giving young Americans the choice of a faster, cheaper, debt-free path to success is the real winning argument. Why is Hawley the only one making it?

A Lobby of Our Own

Presidential power notwithstanding, significant reform on issues like government subsidies, college loans, accreditation, tax-exempt status, campus free speech, and many others, requires legislation. This brings us to the next great element missing not only from the armamentarium but even the radar screen of the academy’s critics. Would-be reformers of the academy need a lobby group of their own, a counterpart to, say, the NRA on the right or NARAL on the left.

Higher Education’s lobbying power is vast and daunting, spanning everything from alumni associations to the battery of well-paid professional lobbyists employed by just about every college and university, to flush and powerful national groups like the American Council on Education. Against this lobbying leviathan, critics of the academy can field...well, nothing.

Yet the potential power of critics of the academy is impressive. Support for the president’s Executive Order on campus free speech polled into the 70th percentile, including many Independents and moderate Democrats. Yet no mechanism to harness that tremendous electoral power now exists. When reform proposals emerge, university lobbyists buttonhole legislators, whose offices are quickly flooded with pro-university letters from professors, students, and alumni. This is a classic case in which the greater numbers of the academy’s critics are overbalanced by the sheer intensity of the loyalists

to the institution slated for reform.

The only way to remedy this is to create a mass-membership lobby group. Millions of Americans are itching to do something about an academy that has betrayed its fundamental mission. Right now, if a legislator supports some reform, it is largely out of the goodness of his heart. What we need is for legislators to understand that when a lobbyist for, say, NALE (The National Association for Liberal Education) steps into their office, their vote will result in mass mailings to NALE's membership. Those mailing will explain that their representative has either struck a blow for higher ed reform, or knuckled under to the campus thought-police. That is how to get a legislator's attention.

A mass-based lobby group like the currently-imaginary NALE would be a supplement to, not a substitute for, existing non-profits focused on higher ed reform. Some of these are more effective than others. The best of the bunch need to be substantially strengthened and enlarged by donors. My favorite is the National Association of Scholars. NAS is hard-hitting and smart, with a comprehensive set of legislative recommendations. The NAS was the first to expose Confucius Institutes on American college campuses as centers of Chinese propaganda and espionage. Groups like NAS are essential to any serious strategy of higher education reform, yet they're run on modest budgets and limited in the number of projects they can undertake at any one time. The NAS and a few other non-profits should be multiple times larger if we're to have any hope of countering a higher ed combine that gives even Croesus a run for his money. Groups like NAS could generate studies, policy recommendations, and model legislation, while a lobby group could help transform those legislative proposals into reality.

Public Trustees

There is a third major route to higher education reform that the academy's critics have not yet thought to travel down. Public universities are run by boards of regents appointed by governors and/or legislators. In some states, regents are elected by the public. Even in red states, regents rarely take steps toward reform. Yet public university boards of regents/trustees/governors (the terms vary from state to state) hold authority over many of the issues up for grabs in our current debates. Trustees could make sure administrators discipline students who silence visiting speakers; they could take steps to increase intellectual diversity on campus; they could strengthen general education requirements in American history and Western civilization; trustees could even restructure, add, or eliminate whole departments and institutes within the university.

The appointment of public university regents is a legitimate, yet almost totally unexplored path by which the public has an opportunity to weigh in on alternative visions of the university. Yet when was the last time you read about a public battle over the election or appointment of a public university trustee? Never, I'll bet. That can and must be changed if we are ever to see reform of American higher education.

Right now, the appointment of public university trustees rather resembles the appointment of American ambassadors after a presidential election. Presidents commonly dole out ambassadorships as rewards to some of their strongest donors and supporters. Governors do the same with trusteeships. To be blunt, many trustees have little or no background on the cultural politics of American universities. Instead of looking to make a change, they see themselves as advocates for their schools, whose job is essentially to support the university president. They're looking for a low-conflict, high-prestige tenure during which they can enjoy passing out football tickets to their friends. This means even many Republican-appointed trustees are more likely to oppose a campus free speech bill, or a proposal to expand intellectual diversity, than to support them.

The quiescence of public university trustees has to change, or higher education reform will be unworkable. Any improvement will have to be pressed on politicians by the public, since governors cannot be expected to welcome constraints on their appointment powers, or on their choice of who to appoint. There is a way to activate trustees, however, using a strategy made famous by Grover Norquist.

Norquist has candidates sign a pledge promising not to raise taxes if they're elected. So why not ask candidates for governor and the state legislature to sign a pledge promising only to appoint university trustees committed to a specific program of reform? That program would include proposals to [safeguard free speech](#), [promote intellectual diversity](#), strengthen general education, reduce the number of unnecessary administrators, uphold the principle of institutional neutrality, and more. If some candidates hesitate to sign the pledge, others will jump on board and might edge out their rivals as a result. In some states, moves to allow the public to choose trustees by election may be in order. We'll know we're headed in the right direction when the media starts covering public battles over the appointment and election of university trustees.

A Short and Long Game

If we break the higher education monopoly by substantially enlarging the apprenticeship sector, mobilize the millions of Americans appalled by higher education's [betrayal of classical liberal ideals](#) behind a powerful lobby group, beef up top higher education non-profits like NAS, and turn the selection of reform-minded state university trustees into a public issue, we just might change the balance of forces that has protected and enriched a bloated, unaccountable, and deeply politicized academy till now.

Yet at best, won't it take years, even decades, to turn things around? Yes, but the benefits of this program will also be immediate and profound. What better way to activate the silent majority dismayed by the excesses of the woke revolution than to launch a public campaign to reform a fatally politicized academy. Everyone knows that campuses are the cradles of wokeness. The creation of a popular lobby group devoted to campus reform; the mobilization of concerned citizens around the selection of university trustees; the specter of colleges losing their monopoly on the future of the young; all of these things will work to shift the momentum of our cultural battles, encouraging and emboldening the silent majority on a wide range of political and cultural issues. That is how to reform the academy. The effort can surely be boosted by a sympathetic White House. Ultimately, however, the academy's critics will have to do the heavy lifting themselves.

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